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ABSTRACT

This technical assistance guide suggests strategies for achieving success in all aspects of follow-up of literacy/employment training program participants. A brief section is devoted to the importance of setting standards for follow-up. The manual then discusses implementation strategies for each of the three aspects of follow-up: tracking for statistical and funding purposes; extending services for graduates; and involving graduates in ongoing program activities. Uses of follow-up data are addressed, and ways in which a program can stay in contact with participants after graduation are suggested. Some graduate activities are described that can ease the transition into job search, employment, or further education and reinforce program contact necessary for collecting follow-up data on retention. Roles that graduates can fill are also suggested, including acting as role models, becoming part of a mentor program, recruiting new participants, delivering testimony at public or legislative hearings, contributing financially, working as instructors or staff, and being on the board of directors or advisory board. A section on staffing considers the alternatives of designation of responsibility to all staff or to specific staff. A final section on funding emphasizes the importance of building in funding for follow-up activities. (YLB)

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# WIDER OPPORTUNITIES: COMBINING LITERACY AND EMPLOYMENT TRAINING FOR WOMEN

Program Participant Follow-Up

A Technical Assistance Guide

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# Literacy and Employment Training Program Participant Follow-Up

## A Technical Assistance Guide

A Supplement to:

Combining Literacy and Employment Training

A Program Model

Published by:

Wider Opportunities for Women
1325 G Street, NW
Lower Level
Washington, DC 20005

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**About Wider Opportunities for Women, Inc.**

Wider Opportunities for Women works nationally and in its home community of Washington, D.C., to achieve economic independence and equality of opportunity for women and girls. For over 25 years, WOW has been at the forefront of women's employment issues.

What began as a local Washington effort to help women help themselves has become a multi-faceted women's employment organization, recognized nationally for its model training and job placement programs for women. WOW also leads a national network of 450 independent women's employment programs and advocates in 48 states. Each year, WOW's network serves more than a quarter of a million women seeking employment information, counseling, training and jobs. With its unique perspective as a job trainer and policy monitor, WOW is a respected advocate for the needs and rights of women workers.

This technical assistance guide was written by Judy A. Beck. The editors were Phyllis Furdell and Sandra Van Fossen. Carrie Roy was the administrative assistant.

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Preface

Single Female Parent Literacy Project

In 1987-88, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) implemented an 18-month, four-city action research effort which focused on the employment training and literacy needs of low-income single mothers. Activities of the Single Female Parent Literacy Project included conducting studies of women's employment and training programs serving low-income women in order to identify successful literacy strategies and the subsequent development and dissemination of a literacy skills program model located within an employment and training setting.

A comprehensive definition of literacy was used throughout the project in recognition of the changes in the nature of jobs predicted for the workforce by the year 2000. Not only are good basic skills--reading, writing, mathematics--needed for the workplace, but also higher order critical thinking skills and familiarity with computer technology.

The findings of the WOW research project suggested that on-site linkage of literacy classes to an employment and training program can be a significant factor in inspiring a woman to view improving her basic education skills as the foundation for improving her economic future. Developed with input from the original case study sites, the resultant program model combines the following key elements:

- o integration of literacy skills into employment training;
- o aggressive, sensitive outreach and recruitment;

- o provision for comprehensive support services;
- o small group training experiences in combination with individualized remediation;
- o inclusion of computer literacy and critical thinking skills;
- o career and other counseling;
- o work experience internships in employer settings; and
- o job search and follow-up.

The full program model is detailed in the manual Wider Opportunities: Combining Literacy and Employment Training for Women. (See publications list at the back of this guide).

**Women's Workplace Literacy Initiative**

From 1988-90, the U.S. Department of Labor funded a demonstration of the literacy and employment training program model. Targeted within four of the original case study sites, the Women's Workplace Literacy Initiative has provided supplemental funding for implementation of the model's key components. The results have been a strengthening of both the literacy and the employment training offerings in each of the four participating agencies:

Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), New York, NY

The Midwest Women's Center (MWC), Chicago, IL

The STEP Foundation: Mary Crowley Academy (MCA), Dallas, TX

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), Washington, DC

## Technical Assistance Guides

The information contained in this technical assistance guide comes out of the demonstration experiences of the four program sites. While this guide can be used as an independent resource, it is designed to be a supplement to the program manual Wider Opportunities: Combining Literacy and Employment Training for Women.

## A Technical Assistance Guide

Follow-up activities are part of the continuum of services incorporated in the model and offered to literacy/employment training program participants. What distinguishes follow-up activities is that they occur mostly after a participant has formally left the core of program services. Even though preparation for follow-up with participants begins from the point of intake, the post-program nature of the activities can make them difficult to fund and to staff.

There are, however, three good reasons for follow-up activities:

- o tracking for statistical and funding purposes;
- o extending services for graduates; and
- o involving graduates as contributors.

Being able to document successful placement and retention of clients into jobs or further education may be critical for a program's continued funding from both public and private sources. Acceptable placement and retention rates are a measure of a program's effectiveness and, depending on the funding source, a necessary component of evaluation.

The literacy/employment training program model rests on the understanding that low-income, single parent women face a number of barriers, both external (environmental instability, lack of support services) and internal (low self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness), as they seek services for themselves. While the program will assist women in overcoming those barriers, the

process of moving into the working world may cause former barriers to reassert themselves--or new barriers may arise. Programs that offer follow-up services to their participants as they move beyond the agency can do more to assist women to become economically self-sufficient than programs that do not offer such services.

Frequently women who have successful experiences with a program, and who maintain ties to that program, want to contribute something back to the program when they are able. Committed graduates are a tremendous resource for any program in terms of recruitment, funding and providing role models for current participants.

These three aspects of follow-up are interrelated and successful activities for one aspect can strengthen efforts for the other. This technical assistance guide will suggest strategies for achieving success in all aspects.

**Setting Standards for Follow-Up**

Each component of the program model has a set of general operating guidelines called standards. All of the specific service delivery methods and strategies implemented should meet these standards. These standards were identified by the research site programs as "ideals" to reach for in programming. If all of the standards for each program component could be met at all times, the research sites believe that literacy programs would be operating at a maximum level of effectiveness. However, it must

be recognized that what our organizations are able to do programmatically, given the limited resources we all face, often may fall short of our own plans and expectations. Having standards to guide our actions and to measure our achievements against is important for that very reason.

At the very least, standards for follow-up activities should cover data collection on the post-graduate status of participants and the provision of some support services to program graduates.

## IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Even though follow-up activities take place after a participant has formally left the program, the groundwork for successful follow-up needs to be laid with staff during initial program planning. Some of the problems associated with follow-up can stem from the perception that it is an adjunct activity, rather than a bona fide program component.

The program may want to consider some level of follow-up contact with drop-outs. Women who have left the program because of external circumstances, and who have expressed an interest in returning at a later time, may be a good source of future participants.

### Tracking for Statistical and Funding Purposes

A program will want to track its graduates in order to gather accurate information about the progress those graduates are making toward achieving personal and program goals. Those

goals are most likely to be placement and retention in employment or further education.

This information can be used in several ways:

- o to document fulfillment of a funder's performance-based contract requirements;
- o to demonstrate overall program impact to interested constituencies;
- o to provide feedback for ongoing program planning; and
- o to facilitate future communication with graduates (see the section "Involving Graduates in Ongoing Program Activities").

Many contracts and grants require that programs place participants in jobs within a defined period of time (usually 30 days) and that participants then be retained in those placements for another defined period (30, 60 or 90 days). The program must document success if it is to receive funding for the participants.

Even if the program is not under such a funding requirement, compiling this documentation can be useful. Being able to present accurate placement and retention information will strengthen the program's image as a successful agency. This information can be used for annual reports, proposals and grant applications, recruitment, marketing materials and orientations to potential participants.

Not all the information needs to be statistical. Compiling anecdotal stories about graduates' successes and how the program assisted them can also be very effective.

Another critical function of follow-up data is to provide analytical feedback for the ongoing program planning process. Charting the pattern that follow-up data provides can indicate areas where a program needs to make adjustments. You may find that placements in nontraditional jobs are more difficult to make or that placements are more successful at certain times of the year. Perhaps initial placement rates are good but retention falls short or placements at certain sites are problematic. Successes and problems can be identified, and the program components that contribute to positive or negative results can be reinforced or redesigned.

Someone within the program needs to be responsible for documenting follow-up placement and retention (see Staffing). This accountability should be assigned during the program planning stage so that follow-up is seen as a part of the total program process and not as an extra activity.

Information about the follow-up process and its purposes should be given to participants at the time of intake or orientation. It should be made clear that this is one step in the program's effort to ensure the best outcome for each participant. While staff will probably initiate the follow-up contact for documentation purposes, participants should be made aware of their responsibilities in this process at the beginning

of the program. They need to know that the program wants to be kept informed of changes of address, telephone number and employment status even after they complete the program.

If the program has computer capability, it will want to incorporate follow-up information in the participant data base, allowing for multiple uses of the data over time.

There are a number of ways that programs can stay in contact with participants after graduation. Usually a combination of approaches is used. The following are ways the demonstration sites have found to be the most successful:

- o during the exit interview with each participant, reinforce the necessity for maintaining contact and plan for how the participant will do that.
- o during the graduation ceremony give each participant an addressed and stamped postcard, along with her certificate or diploma, that can be used to notify the program of address and job changes.
- o as placements are made, give each employer a letter with an addressed and stamped envelope that can be signed and returned at the end of the required retention period.
- o during the initial 30 days that participants are away from the program, have a designated person within the program maintain weekly contacts with graduates. If participants work and cannot be contacted during the day, be prepared to contact them during the weekend or in the evenings.

- o establish regular contacts with participants who have not yet been placed in a job. WOW has established a schedule of Friday mornings called "Working on Work" for graduates who are still looking for employment so they can get support and stay in touch with the program.
- o establish good relationships with employers so that they are aware of the program's follow-up requirements and will work with the program to provide retention information. If the employer also provides information on how the program graduate is progressing on the job, program staff can intervene when there are signs of the new employee experiencing work related problems.
- o hold a 30-day reunion with graduates to update contact information and assess placement and retention status.
- o include past graduates as speakers in current graduation ceremonies and at yearly holiday celebrations.

All activities directed toward gathering data on placement, retention and current status of program graduates can be linked to post graduate services for participants.

## Extending Services for Graduates

Just as there are barriers to low-income women in seeking literacy and employment/training services, there are also barriers in making the transition from a program into employment or further education. As part of its continuum of services, a program needs to consider what activities it can offer the

graduate to ease her transition and increase her chances for success.

It is possible that a few graduates will extend their job search time beyond the placement period specified in a funding contract because they are looking for a particular kind of job. Placement in nontraditional jobs may take longer if good job development contacts are not already in place. Sometimes a graduate may be looking for a particular benefit package, such as health care, tuition benefits or child care. Follow-up staff need to maintain contact with these graduates and encourage their searches.

Again, establishing a solid foundation with participants before they actually leave the program is necessary. Teaching the importance of networking; of making and using contacts and of seeking peer support can be part of a life skills curriculum. Participants can be shown that by staying in touch with the program they can develop good problem-solving skills and secure job leads.

As with tracking graduates for statistical or funding purposes, a staff person needs to be responsible for coordinating follow-up services (see "Staffing"). Designating who is accountable for this should be determined during the program planning stage, so that graduate activities are seen as a part of the total program process; particularly since some of the activities may take place in the evening or on weekends.

Graduates of programs can be highly mobile. While some aspects of their lives may have stabilized through participation in the program, other aspects may lead them to change addresses, lose telephone access or leave the area altogether. Building the ongoing relationship with participants before they leave the program and making it as easy as possible for them to give change of address information to the program is important.

Following are some of the graduate activities that can ease the transition into job search, employment or further education and reinforce program contact that is necessary for collecting follow-up data on retention:

- o schedule regular meetings of alumnae groups outside of program hours to receive peer support and possibly counseling from program staff. For example, Nontraditional Employment for Women conducts "Project ReNEW" which is an evening support group serving approximately 30 women at bi-weekly meetings.
- o conduct alumnae group discussions about job-related issues such as sexual harassment and wage discrimination, and provide referral information as additional resources for graduates to use. NEW's "Project ReNEW" offers access by graduates to a computerized job bank.
- o establish extended support groups for graduates. At Mary Crowley Academy (MCA), participation in a Family Share Team is a reward for those students who have demonstrated a commitment to themselves in achieving their goals. Each

Share Team is a group of three to five people. They volunteer to become an extended family for a program participant. Teams meet once a month with their program participant and work with that woman on five developmental areas: family, education, social, spiritual and financial. Team members offer guidance, encouragement, problem-solving skills and a relationship of love and trust. Sometimes members of the Family Share Teams are former graduates who now want to assist other women.

- o holding reunions or other special events for graduates. Midwest Women's Center has begun a series of client reunions featuring a formal program of reception, speakers and information about the current employment of graduates. These events are funded by local businesses and individual donors.
- o both Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) and Midwest Women's Center (MWC) publish newsletters which include information about the success of graduates in attaining their employment and education goals; programs can also add graduates to their newsletter mailing list.
- o create a special newsletter for graduates.
- o allow access by graduates to the program's library of books or other materials on resume writing, test-taking, occupational information and specific companies. WOW maintains a notebook of job leads and other information for graduates to check when they drop by.

- o make available a specific package of services to graduates for a certain time period after graduation; such as free resume consultation and limited use of telephones, typewriters and duplicating equipment for resumes and cover letters.

Involving Graduates in Ongoing Program Activities

Along with compiling follow-up data and extending services to graduates, the program, the participants and the bureaus, can benefit from comprehensive follow-up. Graduates who continue to feel connected to the program are likely to want to contribute to the program. Program graduates are valuable resources you can tap into by recognizing their new status as successful participants.

The following are a number of roles graduates can fill:

- o **acting as role models for current participants.** Inviting successful graduates to speak during the orientation of a program can inspire and encourage new trainees. A program might consider making a video of such a presentation inviting a local television station to do the taping as an in kind contribution.
- o **becoming part of a mentor program that matches graduates with current participants.** Working as a mentor with a new trainee can often have a positive effect on the graduate as well. Mentoring teaches supervisory skills, problem

solving and communication skills; as well as making a contribution to the trainee.

- o **recruiting new participants for the program through public appearances.** When staff members go out into the community to talk about the program, graduates should be invited to the meetings to give a first hand account of their experiences. Use program graduates in Public Service Announcements (PSA's) as much as possible so that viewers can relate more closely to the message.
- o **delivering testimony at public or legislative hearings regarding policy issues of concern to participants such as funding for employment training, vocational education, child care and access to nontraditional jobs.** By pre-interviewing graduates, staff can prepare testimony and 'coach' the graduate to present her experience to an audience of decision makers. This technique is often far more successful than having board or staff members present the material. Usually, the graduate may be accompanied by a staff member who can answer questions.
- o **contributing financially to support services fund that will assist current participants to succeed in the program.** Requesting small donations from the graduates of your programs can have many positive outcomes. It is an excellent selling point to large donors when they know that program graduates feel strongly about the program. The graduates are more engaged in the programs future and

the new trainees well being, and the money can be used for the many very real crisis situations that come up unexpectedly.

- o **working as instructors, classroom aides, outreach recruiters or in other staff positions within the program.** Often graduates have time between jobs or are temporarily laid off from their jobs after they have graduated from the program. This is an excellent opportunity for them to brush up on their skills and check on employment leads by returning to the program as a volunteer. Graduates can give something back to new trainees while they help themselves.
- o **becoming part of the program's board of directors or advisory board.** The presence of a grassroots, working woman on a board of directors of a training organization adds important diversity. Board members often 'hear' better when a program constituent is talking instead of the staff. The graduate will be challenged by the experience to overcome barriers to communicating with people from all walks of life.

Timing will be important when involving graduates in the ongoing life of the program. Recent graduates may need to stay very focused on their new jobs or school schedules and family responsibilities. Both their time and financial resources may be limited after graduation. If follow-up contact has been

successful, the program will know when individual graduates are in a position to become more involved.

**STAFFING**

The demonstration sites agree that designating staff responsibility for tracking placement, retention and coordinating graduate activities is important. MWC has sometimes experienced problems with follow-up because it had not specifically designated staff responsibility. As is often the case, their public funding sources do not support follow-up activities, driving the agency to focus more on attracting new clients rather than extending services to graduates. For that reason MWC, like many programs, seeks private funding for follow-up (see Funding).

MCA goes to the other end of the spectrum and assigns all staff some form of follow-up responsibility. Most of the Academy's staff are former graduates. Student groups meet monthly with them at the academies in their neighborhoods, after students have begun attending the local community college. Selected Academy students also meet with their Family Share Teams.

When assigning staff, it is not necessary that the same person do all follow-up tasks. In fact, it may be more effective to have many people from the program contacting graduates; it can give the feeling that the total program is involved with former participants.

Both Wider Opportunities for Women and Nontraditional Employment for Women designate specific staff for follow-up. NEW has an Apprenticeship Preparation Specialist who works with those women who have been accepted by a union and will begin a trade. This specialist ensures that the new apprentice is working and attending apprenticeship school. A Support Group Specialist begins working with women after they have started new jobs and have joined the evening support group. This specialist also coordinates the computerized job bank.

WOW assigns both the Administrative Program Assistant and the Employment Specialist to track graduates. The nontraditional skills instructor runs an evening support group for program graduates and other women in the trades.

Having a Graduate Activities Coordinator is an ideal situation. If that is not possible, each program must decide the best staff designation for follow-up activities, depending on the program's staffing pattern and funding flexibility. As experienced by the demonstration sites, alternatives are possible and carry pros and cons to be considered.

For example, designating an instructor, a counselor or a job development person as a part-time coordinator may be the solution. Any one of these people will have worked with participants and will be a familiar contact. The job developer will have established an ongoing relationship with different placement site employers, which can be valuable.

However, some programs have seen that staff can be stretched too thin. It can be difficult trying to provide effective follow-up services when the priority is teaching, counseling or placing current participants.

Some programs delegate the tracking task to a clerical or administrative support person. While this type of activity may fit with the general duties of such a position, it may not always be an effective match if that person does not have an established relationship with participants.

If the program has a good pool of volunteers, it is possible to utilize them to provide the full range of follow-up activities. One or two trained volunteers can handle this with a staff person assuming oversight responsibility.

Some thought must be given to time considerations for staff designated to perform follow-up duties. As mentioned, many contacts with graduates, as well as the scheduling of alumnae events, may need to occur in the evenings or over weekends when graduates will be available. Hours of work must be made clear to any staff working on follow-up. It is critical to include specific follow-up responsibilities in staff job descriptions so that there is clarity of accountability. This also reinforces the seriousness with which follow-up tasks must be performed. The key is to treat follow-up as a regular program activity.

**FUNDING**

It is important that programs begin to build in funding for follow-up activities. Unfortunately, many funding sources, both public and private, do not understand the critical nature of follow-up and are reluctant to support it. Programs may need to spend extra time in educating potential funders about the benefits of a comprehensive approach to follow-up and how it will ensure a better return for dollars spent on training and literacy.

Publicly funded performance-based contracts will probably require some level of post graduate tracking, so that the program can be reimbursed for successful placements and retention in those placements. Usually such a contract will call for no more than a 30-day retention follow-up. Funding will not support additional activities. Public funders often do not acknowledge the importance of the "transition to work" follow-up activities that can make a difference for many women exiting a program.

Explaining the importance of follow-up activities, and the uses of such data, may be just as necessary when approaching other types of funding sources. A number of the demonstration sites have turned to private foundations or individual donors to fund follow-up activities. For example, Nontraditional Employment for Women developed a proposal and approached ten different foundations and banks before securing sufficient levels of funding from four of them for the support groups and the computerized job bank. NEW's experience shows that if follow-up is presented as a necessary program component for successful

program impact, persistent effort to get funding for such activities is likely to be successful.

It is possible that follow-up support groups and events can be opened to other working women in the area for a fee. This is especially true for women in nontraditional jobs. Looking at other possible ideas for generating unrestricted income may be a way to at least partially fund follow-up activities.

**Conclusion**

Keeping close track of graduates is the foundation for a rich resource for the staff and trainees in your program. Extending program services to graduates as they make the often difficult transition into employment, or further training, will have a positive impact on placement and retention rates. Involving graduates in the ongoing activities of the program is a way of providing invaluable services to participants and programs through mentoring, tutoring, and recruiting.

Treating follow-up as a regular program component is key to its successful implementation. Funding must be secured and guidelines for follow-up administration and activities should be formalized. Important components in programs are often lost when key staff members leave the program. A notebook documenting follow-up strategies can save much time and energy.

The demonstration sites have shown that many alternatives are available to programs and flexibility is important. Remember, every woman you serve is an ambassador for the

program. Whether she stays days, weeks or months, each graduate can carry a positive message about your program to the community of women who need your help, and to the community of leaders who support your work.

**Technical Assistance Guide Evaluation Form**

Name, Program and Address:_____

_____

1. How did you first learn about the WOW Combining Literacy and Employment Training Program Model:

_____ Ordered manual from publications list

_____ Attended training on the program model

_____ Learned of it through this guide

_____ Referred to the manual/model by another program

_____ Other

2. Are you currently operating an employment and training program for low-income women that:

_____ incorporates literacy classes

_____ would like to begin literacy classes

_____ is not interested in beginning literacy classes

3. How has this guide been useful to you?

4. Would was the most helpful aspect of this guide?

5. How could this guide be improved?

6. Please share any successful strategies that you are familiar with related to this guide's subject matter.